Evolution of Tyranny: The Scale Laws of Dictatorship

(Skinner–Chomsky Debate Series, 3 part)

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Abstract

Tyranny is usually explained through the character of rulers, the failure of institutions, ideological extremism or the political submission of populations. This article proposes a different and deliberately speculative perspective: tyranny may also be studied as an evolving technology of coordination whose forms change with the scale and complexity of human society. Drawing upon Geoffrey West's work on complexity and scaling, the article asks whether the transition from small communities to cities, states, empires and contemporary digital networks creates increasing pressures for systems capable of coordinating, predicting and regulating the behaviour of enormous populations. West does not propose a mathematical law of dictatorship, and no such established scaling law currently exists; rather, his demonstration that complex systems change qualitatively as they increase in size provides the conceptual basis for extending the question into political organisation. Xavier Márquez's genealogy from ancient tyranny towards modern dictatorship and authoritarianism reveals a parallel historical transformation: political control progressively migrates from the character and body of the ruler towards institutions, bureaucracies and systems of legitimation. Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman's distinction between fear dictatorships and contemporary spin dictatorships carries this evolution further. The modern authoritarian ruler increasingly substitutes informational manipulation, managed elections, legal pressure and manufactured popularity for spectacular violence. Tyranny does not disappear. Its technology changes. The article develops Ayolov's hypothesis that this transformation cannot be separated from language, mass communication and the increasing complexity of linguistic civilisation. Small groups can coordinate through direct interpersonal relations; mass societies require symbolic systems capable of organising strangers who will never meet. Language, writing, law, bureaucracy, ideology, statistics and media consequently become technologies of scale, converting embodied individuals into administratively manageable categories and shared narratives. Yet, as proposed throughout the Miscommunication framework, increasing communication does not necessarily generate increasing understanding. Greater connectivity can simultaneously multiply competing descriptions of reality, ideological fragmentation, elite conflict and unpredictable interactions. From this perspective, the evolution of political control follows a movement from commanding behaviour towards engineering the environment in which behaviour occurs, reconnecting the political problem with Skinner's rejection of autonomous man. Digital surveillance, behavioural data and artificial intelligence potentially represent the next stage: power capable not merely of punishing actions after they occur but of

predicting probabilities and modifying informational environments beforehand. The provocative concept of the "scale laws of dictatorship" therefore describes a hypothesis rather than a discovered mathematical law: as social complexity increases, mechanisms of control may become increasingly systemic, informational and impersonal. The ancient tyrant controlled bodies; the modern dictator controlled institutions; the spin dictator increasingly controls perceptions; the future algorithmic sovereign could attempt to control probabilities. The ultimate political question is consequently no longer simply who should rule, but whether large-scale civilisation itself continuously generates pressures towards increasingly sophisticated forms of behavioural coordination. If so, the most consequential future tyranny may be one in which the tyrant gradually disappears, leaving behind an adaptive system of control without a single face.

Keywords

tyranny; dictatorship; authoritarianism; Geoffrey West; scaling laws; complexity; Xavier Márquez; Sergei Guriev; Daniel Treisman; B. F. Skinner; spin dictatorship; digital authoritarianism; artificial intelligence; behavioural control; mass society; language; Miscommunication; political scale; algorithmic sovereignty; cybernetic governance; Peter Ayolov

Foreword: Caligula's Failed Conspiracy Against Tyranny

"Can the slave ever truly be free?"

Stefan Tsanev, The Conspiracy of Caligula

Stefan Tsanev's play The Conspiracy of Caligula offers an unexpectedly appropriate entrance into the argument of Evolution of Tyranny: The Scale Laws of Dictatorship. Tsanev overturns the conventional image of Caligula as simply the archetype of the insane Roman despot. His emperor becomes a tragic political experimenter who attempts something apparently absurd: possessing absolute power, he tries to make tyranny so grotesque, humiliating and intolerable that the people themselves will learn to hate it. His excesses become political theatre. The horse elevated to senatorial dignity, the spectacles, humiliations and absurdities of imperial authority are intended to expose dictatorship by exaggerating it. Yet the experiment fails. The population does not respond to the ugliness of tyranny by spontaneously becoming republican. Fear of disorder proves stronger than the desire for freedom. The Senate, the crowd and the structures surrounding the emperor reproduce precisely the political dependency Caligula hoped to destroy. Particularly revealing is Mnester, the actor whose tongue has been cut out and who functions as the emperor's shadow and mirror. His presence concentrates Tsanev's fundamental question: can someone habituated to slavery simply be commanded to become free? Caligula discovers the paradox of liberation from above. An emperor may order obedience, but he cannot order a population to become autonomous. Freedom imposed by absolute power contradicts itself.

Tsanev had approached the same paradox from below in his older play The Last Night of Socrates. There the scale is deliberately microscopic: one condemned philosopher and one prison guard. Socrates attempts to teach his captor to think independently, only to discover that liberation cannot simply be transferred from one consciousness to another. The guard may

prefer the security of his position to the uncertainty demanded by freedom. Caligula repeats the experiment at the scale of an empire. Socrates cannot liberate one man; Caligula cannot liberate a multitude. Read together, the plays suggest an unsettling proposition central to this article: perhaps tyranny survives not simply because tyrants continually appear, but because structures of dependence are collectively reproduced at every level of society. The dictator is only the visible summit of a behavioural system extending through institutions, hierarchies, incentives, fears and ordinary acts of compliance. This is precisely where Tsanev's theatrical paradox meets the proposed "scale laws of dictatorship". As human organisation grows from interpersonal hierarchy to bureaucracy, state and empire, domination changes its technological form without necessarily losing its underlying function. The political problem may therefore be deeper than replacing the ruler or announcing a more just system. Caligula's failure warns that removing the desire for a dictator is considerably harder than removing the dictator himself. Tyranny, in this sense, is not the achievement of one tyrant. It is a collective accomplishment—and the emperor may ultimately be only the mask it chooses to wear.

Introduction: When Society Becomes Too Large to Know Itself

The history of tyranny can be read as a history of scale. For most of human evolutionary existence, people lived within relatively small communities in which social relations were direct, reputations were personal and collective behaviour could be coordinated through face-to-face interaction, custom and immediate knowledge of others. Mass sedentary civilisation created a fundamentally different problem. Settlements became cities, cities became states, states became empires, and eventually hundreds of millions of strangers were expected to coexist within political systems whose members could never personally know one another. Scale therefore required new technologies of coordination: language and writing, law and bureaucracy, taxation and censuses, religion and ideology, money and administrative categories. Geoffrey West's research into complex systems provides a provocative framework for reconsidering this transformation. His scaling research shows that increasing the size of a complex system does not merely produce a larger version of the same system; scale changes its properties. Cities, for example, can produce disproportionate increases in innovation, economic activity and social interaction while simultaneously amplifying undesirable phenomena such as crime and disease. West has not proposed a scaling law of dictatorship, and the present argument does not claim that political tyranny can simply be derived from an urban scaling equation. Instead, his work suggests a question that political theory rarely asks: if so many characteristics of complex systems transform systematically with scale, why should political control remain unaffected? Ayolov's hypothesis begins at this point. Perhaps the repeated appearance of increasingly sophisticated mechanisms of authority should be understood partly as a response to the expanding coordination problem created by mass civilisation. The ancient tyrant ruling a city, the imperial sovereign commanding distant territories, the bureaucratic dictator governing millions and the contemporary authoritarian manipulating digital information environments are not simply different costumes worn by the same political pathology. They may represent successive adaptations of political control to changing levels of social complexity.

This interpretation also extends the argument developed in the first two articles of the Skinner–Chomsky Today Series. If the autonomous linguistic self is no longer accepted as the

unquestionable starting point of explanation, political theory cannot automatically construct society as an aggregation of millions of completely sovereign inner agents whose choices originate independently within themselves. Skinner's environmentalism introduces an uncomfortable alternative: behaviour can be altered by changing the conditions under which behaviour occurs. At small scales such influence remains visible and personal; at mass scale it becomes institutional. Schools shape repertoires, laws modify consequences, bureaucracies classify individuals, markets organise incentives, media structure attention and political narratives establish the symbolic categories through which populations interpret events. The Miscommunication thesis adds another complication. More communication does not necessarily produce greater agreement. As populations and communication networks expand, the number of possible interactions, interpretations, conflicts and competing descriptions of reality can also expand. Language makes mass civilisation possible while simultaneously multiplying its unpredictability. This is where Xavier Márquez's conceptual movement from ancient tyranny towards dictatorship and authoritarianism and Guriev and Treisman's distinction between fear and spin dictatorship become parts of a larger evolutionary pattern. Political power progressively moves away from the visible body of the tyrant and into systems capable of organising behaviour at scale. The whip becomes law; law becomes bureaucracy; propaganda becomes information management; surveillance becomes data analysis. Artificial intelligence potentially pushes this trajectory further by allowing political systems to classify, predict and influence behaviour faster than any individual ruler could comprehend. The central question of this article is therefore not whether dictatorship is inevitable or desirable. It is whether increasing social scale repeatedly creates pressures for more powerful technologies of coordination, and whether the evolution of tyranny consists precisely in adapting those technologies to each new level of complexity. The most advanced dictatorship might consequently look less, not more, like the dictatorships of the past. Its final achievement would be paradoxical: perfecting the machinery of control until the tyrant himself was no longer necessary.

Part I: From the Tyrant's Body to the Body of the State

The meaning of tyranny changed when the scale of society changed. As Xavier Márquez argues in Ancient Tyranny and Modern Dictatorship, classical Greek tyranny was understood largely through the character of the ruler: the tyrant was distinguished by lawlessness, appetite, self-interest and the use of political power for personal ends. Modern dictatorship emerged from a different conceptual genealogy, connected to the Roman problem of extraordinary authority and, eventually, to questions of sovereignty, legitimacy and institutional power. This transition is crucial because modern mass society cannot be ruled through personality alone. A ruler governing millions of strangers cannot personally observe, reward, punish or even know the population supposedly under his authority. Power must therefore migrate from the tyrant's body into the body of the state. Bureaucracies, police, courts, schools, taxation systems, censuses, identity documents, archives and mass media extend political authority across distances impossible for any individual ruler to master. The modern state consequently represents an enormous technology for converting human complexity into administratively manageable forms. This transformation helps explain Márquez's historical movement from tyranny towards dictatorship and eventually authoritarianism: as political systems become larger and institutionally denser, the character of one ruler becomes progressively less sufficient for

explaining how domination actually operates. The twentieth-century dictator may appear to embody the state through portraits, speeches and personality cults, but his apparent omnipresence conceals dependence upon thousands of institutions and millions of routine acts performed by people who may never encounter him. The tyrant therefore becomes paradoxically less important as tyranny becomes technologically more capable. What scales is not the body of the ruler but the network through which commands, classifications, incentives and consequences circulate.

Ayolov's language hypothesis adds another dimension to this transformation because the expansion of political authority is inseparable from symbolic abstraction. A state cannot govern millions of people as complete embodied individuals; it must first transform them into administratively readable entities. A person becomes a name, number, citizen, taxpayer, voter, employee, soldier, immigrant, beneficiary, suspect or statistical unit. Territory becomes borders and coordinates; behaviour becomes legal categories; obligations become written rules; collective memory becomes official history. Language is therefore not merely something political subjects use to discuss government. It is part of the infrastructure through which government becomes possible at scale. The transition from the prehistoric community to mass civilisation is simultaneously a transition from direct social knowledge towards symbolic administration. This helps explain why the evolution of tyranny cannot be reduced to increasingly cruel rulers. Political power becomes embedded in linguistic and institutional environments that continue functioning when individual leaders disappear. Skinner's analysis of behavioural control becomes unexpectedly relevant here: effective control need not continuously force an autonomous inner person to surrender. It can alter the environment of available actions and consequences. Laws make some behaviours costly; institutions make others advantageous; education establishes repertoires; bureaucratic classifications determine access; media environments organise visibility and attention. From this perspective, the evolution of political control is a progressive externalisation of the tyrant. The sovereign does not need to stand behind every command because the command has been built into the environment. This also suggests the first speculative "scale law" of dictatorship: as the population subjected to political coordination increases, durable control must become less personal and more systemic. The ancient tyrant could rule through proximity and fear; the mass state requires categories, institutions and information. Tyranny consequently evolves by disappearing into the machinery of civilisation itself. The decisive political question is no longer simply "Who is the tyrant?" but "Where, within an increasingly complex system, does the function once performed by the tyrant now reside?"

Part II: The Scaling Problem: When Complexity Becomes Control

Geoffrey West's work on scaling provides a useful conceptual bridge between the physical organisation of civilisation and the political problem of governing it. The essential insight is that increasing size does not simply produce more of the same. Complex systems transform as they scale. In cities, infrastructure can exhibit economies of scale while many socioeconomic activities intensify disproportionately: larger urban populations generate greater interaction, innovation and economic productivity, but also amplify phenomena such as crime and infectious disease. The political extension proposed here is deliberately hypothetical: there is no established mathematical "scale law of dictatorship" comparable to the scaling relationships

West identifies in biology and cities. Yet the question follows naturally from the logic of complexity. When ten individuals interact, the field of possible relationships remains comparatively comprehensible; when millions interact through institutions, markets and communication networks, no individual consciousness can follow more than a negligible fraction of the system. More people mean not merely more voices but more interactions among voices, more competing interests, more information, more centres of influence and more possibilities for unexpected combinations. This is where Ayolov's Miscommunication thesis becomes politically important. The development of communication technology does not necessarily drive society towards universal understanding. Increased connectivity can multiply contradiction, competing narratives and informational entropy. The same linguistic technology that permits enormous populations to coordinate also permits them to construct mutually incompatible descriptions of reality. Political scale therefore generates a paradox: civilisation requires increasingly extensive communication to function, while increasing communication can itself become a source of complexity and instability. Tyranny can be reconsidered within this framework not as an automatic consequence of scale but as one recurrent political response to the desire to reduce this unpredictability. Authority simplifies. It establishes classifications, restricts alternatives, standardises rules and attempts to transform an incalculable field of possible behaviours into a narrower range of administratively predictable outcomes.

Skinner's environmental account of behaviour makes the evolution of such control easier to understand. If behaviour is influenced by its conditions and consequences, a sophisticated political system does not need to conquer some mysterious autonomous self hidden inside every citizen. It can increasingly organise the environment within which choices are made. The development of mass society can consequently be read as an evolution in techniques of behavioural regulation. The primitive ruler commands and punishes. The bureaucratic state constructs durable systems of incentives and prohibitions. The twentieth-century dictatorship adds mass propaganda capable of synchronising narratives across millions of people. The digital political system acquires something qualitatively different: continuous information about behaviour itself. Search histories, movements, purchases, communications, preferences and social networks can transform populations from largely unknown masses into streams of measurable data. Artificial intelligence potentially closes another part of the loop by using those data not merely to describe what populations have done but to estimate what they may do next. The analogy with the linguistic argument of the previous articles is striking. The LLM predicts the next token; the emerging political machine dreams of predicting the next behaviour. Neither prediction needs perfect knowledge of an autonomous interior being if sufficiently useful regularities can be extracted from observable histories. The speculative scale law proposed here can therefore be stated more precisely: as societies become larger and more interconnected, the political value of prediction increases because direct knowledge and personal control become impossible. This does not make authoritarianism inevitable, nor does predictive capacity guarantee political stability; complex systems can generate precisely the black swans that models fail to anticipate. But it changes the evolutionary direction of political power. The ancient sovereign wanted obedience. The modern bureaucratic state wanted legibility. The twentieth-century dictator wanted ideological conformity. The emerging algorithmic system wants probability. At sufficient scale, the most effective form of control may no longer be the command "You must do this," but the quieter technological ambition: "We already know what you are most likely to do next."

Part III: The Dictator Disappears: From Fear to Spin to Algorithm

The evolution of tyranny becomes clearest when political power is examined not through ideology but through the changing technology of control. Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman describe one of the most important stages of this transformation through their distinction between “fear dictators” and “spin dictators”. The classical twentieth-century autocrat demonstrated power visibly: censorship was explicit, political enemies disappeared, propaganda proclaimed the regime’s ideological truth, and terror reminded citizens of the consequences of disobedience. Such systems survive, but the more adaptive authoritarian model often works differently. The spin dictator may preserve constitutions, elections, opposition parties, private businesses and formally independent media while quietly manipulating the environment in which these institutions operate. Instead of eliminating every opponent, power can marginalise selected opponents through legal, financial or administrative pressure; instead of prohibiting information completely, it can overwhelm inconvenient information with alternative narratives; instead of demanding ideological enthusiasm, it may require only political passivity. Guriev and Treisman therefore reveal something more consequential than a change in authoritarian public relations: repression can become less visible as control becomes more sophisticated. This evolution closely resembles Skinner’s distinction between crude coercion and the organisation of behavioural contingencies. The most efficient environment is not necessarily one in which citizens constantly experience themselves as being forced. It is one in which the structure of incentives, information and available alternatives makes some behaviours progressively more probable than others. The spin dictatorship is therefore already moving beyond the traditional tyrant. Its ideal citizen need not love the ruler or believe every official statement. It may be sufficient that the citizen remains uncertain, distracted, fragmented or convinced that meaningful alternatives are either dangerous or impossible.

Digitalisation potentially pushes this evolution towards a qualitatively different political system. Surveillance once depended upon human informants, paper archives and limited observation; digital societies continuously produce behavioural traces as a normal consequence of everyday life. Artificial intelligence makes those traces potentially useful for classification and prediction at a scale beyond the cognitive capacity of any ruler or bureaucracy. The resulting trajectory can be described as a movement from personal sovereignty towards algorithmic sovereignty: the tyrant commands, the bureaucracy records, the spin dictatorship manipulates, while the emerging cybernetic system attempts to anticipate. This is where the fictional Genetic Dynasty of Foundation provides a revealing metaphor. Brother Dawn, Brother Day and Brother Dusk eliminate one ancient weakness of monarchy by separating imperial continuity from the lifespan of a single sovereign. Yet even this imagined system remains centred upon human rulers. The logical endpoint of systemic political control would move further: continuity would belong not to a cloned emperor but to the governing mechanism itself. From Ayolov’s perspective, this produces the most disturbing version of the scale hypothesis. As civilisation becomes increasingly complex, the ruler may become progressively less important precisely because the technologies surrounding rule become more capable. The future authoritarian system might preserve elections, personalised media, consumer choice and the appearance of individual autonomy while continuously measuring social behaviour and modifying informational environments in response. Such a system would not eliminate black swans: prediction always encounters novelty, and attempts at excessive control can themselves create fragility and catastrophic failure. Nor would algorithmic governance somehow become morally legitimate merely because it was efficient. The point is evolutionary rather than

normative. Tyranny may survive by ceasing to resemble tyranny. Its historical vector runs from the ruler's body towards institutions, from institutions towards information, and from information towards prediction. The final paradox is therefore that the most technologically advanced dictator may be almost invisible. When the machinery can observe, classify, predict and influence without waiting for personal commands, the dictator has not conquered the system. The system has made the dictator obsolete.

Conclusion: The Tyrant Without a Face

"A Multitude of men, are made One Person, when they are by one man, or one Person, Represented."

Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, 1651

Hobbes gave the modern state its most enduring image: one gigantic sovereign whose body is composed of the multitude. Nearly four centuries later, the image can be read backwards. The multitude does not merely inhabit the body of Leviathan; the multitude is Leviathan. Remove the thousands of administrators, policemen, judges, experts, teachers, soldiers, technicians, propagandists and obedient citizens who reproduce its commands, and the gigantic sovereign disappears. Tyranny is therefore a collective achievement disguised as individual rule.

The evolution of tyranny suggests that political domination has never depended solely upon the existence of an exceptional tyrant. The personality of the ruler is the most visible component of authoritarian power and therefore the easiest one to blame, overthrow or replace, but complex political systems cannot be sustained by personality alone. The argument developed here proposes that the history traced by Márquez from ancient tyranny towards dictatorship and authoritarianism, the transformation identified by Guriev and Treisman from fear towards spin, and the scaling perspective inspired by West can be read together as stages in the progressive depersonalisation of political control. The ancient tyrant controlled bodies through proximity and coercion; the modern dictator increasingly controlled institutions; the spin dictator learned to control perceptions and informational environments; the emerging algorithmic sovereign acquires the possibility of modelling probabilities. Yet at every stage the ruler remains dependent upon an enormous network of cooperation. Officials interpret regulations, administrators classify populations, police enforce decisions, journalists reproduce narratives, experts provide legitimacy, businesses maintain infrastructure, citizens obey rules and millions of ordinary participants perform the routines through which the political order reproduces itself. Tyranny is therefore a collective effort, not simply individual rule. The dictator standing on the balcony is the theatrical representation of a distributed system whose actual existence depends upon innumerable interactions occurring far below the summit. This observation also explains why removing dictators so frequently fails to remove the political structures associated with them. The individual can disappear overnight; the behavioural, bureaucratic, linguistic and institutional environment that made his authority possible can survive for generations.

Dictatorship can consequently be considered not merely a regime located at the macro level of the state but a recurring organisational model reproduced at different scales. Families, schools, armies, corporations, bureaucracies and political institutions can all contain asymmetrical structures in which decisions are concentrated, rules descend through hierarchies and obedience

is exchanged for coordination, security or efficiency. This does not mean that every hierarchy is a dictatorship, nor that authoritarian government is therefore desirable or inevitable. It means that the concentration of decision-making power repeatedly reappears because collective action confronts a persistent problem: coordination becomes harder as the number of actors, interests and possible interactions increases. Democratic institutions address this problem through representation, deliberation, competition, distributed authority and legal restraints, but they do not abolish hierarchy or coercive power; they attempt to constrain and legitimise them. The scale hypothesis therefore leads to a darker conclusion than the conventional opposition between good democracy and evil dictatorship permits. Political history repeatedly changes the justification, vocabulary and institutional appearance of concentrated power while retaining many of its organisational functions. The crucial struggle may consequently concern not whether power can be eliminated, but how it is distributed, constrained, observed, corrected and prevented from becoming catastrophic. A new political façade cannot by itself solve this problem. Indeed, disguising authoritarian power behind a more acceptable façade can make abuse harder to detect. The more consequential possibility for the next stage of this series is therefore different: if hierarchical coordination continually re-emerges at both macro and micro levels, perhaps political design should stop pretending that power has disappeared and instead expose its mechanisms to continuous empirical scrutiny, limitation and correction. The question for Walden 3.1 will be whether the organisational efficiency historically sought through dictatorship can be separated from arbitrary personal sovereignty, secrecy and uncontrolled coercion. The tyrant without a face is already conceivable. The challenge is whether removing the face produces a safer system of collective coordination—or merely a dictatorship so completely distributed through everyday life that nobody any longer recognises who, or what, is ruling.

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